



VOYAGE BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: A STUDY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *INTERPRETER OF MALADIES* BY JHUMPA LAHIRI

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Indian English Literature refers to the body of work by writers in India who write in English Language and whose native language could be one of the numerous languages of India. Diasporic Literature comes under the broader realm of Postcolonial Literature- the production from previously colonised countries such as India. In Postcolonial literatures, the concept of 'exile' involves the idea of a separation or distancing from literal homeland or a cultural and ethnic origin. Migrant literature is a topic which has commanded growing interest within literary studies since the 1980s. 'Migrants' are defined as people who have left their homes to settle in countries or cultural communities which are initially strange to them. The transnational mobility of people may be the result of forced or voluntary migration, of self-exile or expulsion. Under the generalized rubric of 'diaspora', we will engage with the experiences of displacement and homelessness, the ideologies of 'home' and nation, the cultures of diaspora, and identity questions.

The South Asian Diaspora, shaped by dispersions of people, goods, ideas and beliefs that flowed from and through the Indian Subcontinent is currently one of the world's largest Diasporas. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and the Maldives all anchor a sense of home for people who have moved outside the region through the centuries. The Indian Diaspora has become a part of the American and English literary traditions. Indian English Writers like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukharjee, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Sunetra Gupta, Rohinton Mistry and Jhumpa Lahiri have all made their names while residing abroad. Diaspora is regarded not as a singular phenomenon, but as historically varied and heterogeneous in its aspects.

Jhumpa Lahiri introduced us to people who left behind family and friends and the familiar heat and bustle of India to build a new life in America- a cold, bleak land of strangers and new customs. Addressing the themes of immigration, collision of cultures and importance of names in *The Namesake*, Lahiri demonstrates how much of a struggle immigration can be. *The Namesake* is a cross cultural, multigenerational story of a Hindu- Bengali family's journey to self- acceptance in Boston. Lahiri has always written about Indians negotiating America in *The Interpreter of Maladies*. It is a collection of nine short stories that explore themes of identity, the immigrant experience, cultural differences, love and family. The characters are largely Indian or Indian- American and their stories together paint an evocative picture of India's Diaspora. Each character in this collection wrestles with identity, whether newly displaced or descended from immigrants. There is a longing felt for the place of one's birth, a fear of losing one's culture and fear of not being accepted. The eight stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* fall in to two groups. All stories focus on members of Bengali families dealing with England or America. All deal with making and remaking lives, loves and identities in the wake of radical disruptions. *The Lowland* is different in that the isolation comes not from American culture, but from within. Removed from the familiar context of India and its stratified customs and relations, Subhash and Gauri live comfortably, eschewing contact with their families and assimilating into Rhode Island Society.

This paper is intended to study the conflict facing the generations of Indian Diaspora with special reference to Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*.

Diaspora is a term often used today to describe practically any population which is considered 'de-territorialised' or 'transnational' that is which has originated in a land other than which it currently resides, and whose social, economic and political networks cross the borders of nation-states or, indeed span the globe. Migration and cross-cultural encounters have always affected the lives of migrants and there is always the possibility of rejection, confusion and tension when people from different cultures interact. As the immigrants settle in the new place, they need to adjust and accommodate to the language, habits, dress, food and sometimes even values are to be compromised in the process. Change brings challenges to new settlers.

The rising star on the Diaspora sky, Jhumpa Lahiri portrays the theme of cultural displacement at its best. The short story collection of Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, highlights some facets of cultural displacement. It dwells upon the identity crisis and quests to explore their destiny in an alien land. Her characters suffer on

an intimate level the dislocation and disruption brought on by the change of residence. What they aspired for, and ultimately what they are, they are not able to strike a balance between the two worlds; the one left behind and the other they have come to live in. They are obstinately rooted in the home culture and relentlessly refuse to adopt themselves to the alien culture.

The first story of the book "A Temporary Matter" is the story of Shoba and Shukumar, a young couple who had lived in Boston for three years. The story takes its name from the temporary matter of electricity cut off for an hour daily for five days. So the story is confined to those five days when there will be no electricity for an hour. Lahiri's tale examines how a tragic loss can lead to indifference and a breakdown in communication between two people who once intensely loved each other. It exemplifies universal lessons in love and the individual's struggles to overcome change and insecurities within relationships. Shoba and Shukumar trapped within themselves, refusing to communicate- Shoba "looking at thirty-three, like the type of woman she had once claimed she would never resemble" and Shukumar who was a mediocre student:

Until September he had been diligent if not dedicated, summarizing chapters, outlining pads of yellow lined paper. But now he would lie in their bed until he got bored, gazing at his side of the closet..... at the row of the tweed jackets and corduroy trousers he would not have to choose from to teach his classes that semester. (4)

They were here for the sake of greater opportunities, perhaps a better standard of living. And yet it was tough, because they had taken such a huge step and left so much behind. Feeling as if they are on a river with a foot in two different boats, they spent their immigrant life. Each boat wants to pull them in a separate direction, and they are always torn between the two. They are always hovering; literally straddling two worlds, and have always thought of that idea that metaphor for how they feel how they live. Cultural incongruity mars marital understanding and this was the tragic part of their life. Because of the misunderstanding between them in an alien place they were alienated from each other. The things disliked by Shoba were liked by Shukumar and vice versa. Thus, Lahiri subtly evokes the couple's common state of lack of interest in their shared environment as both have failed to withstand the change.

The second story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" also brings forth the aspect of homesickness and withdrawal into a private world of memories. The story narrated by a young child Lilia. Pirzada, a professor of Botany from Bangladesh, had to visit America to pursue his research. Each week Mr. Pirzada wrote letters to his wife and sent comic books to each of his seven daughters. While Mr. Pirzada was living in Boston he was invited by an Indian couple living there. They had a ten year old daughter named Lilia. Lilia, despite the fact of being so young to understand the differences prevailing among human beings belonging to different cultures, was able to trace out and understand the identical likes and dislikes between her family and Mr. Pirzada, the Indian visitor. "Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same" (25). Even the similarity in their regular habits was keenly noticed by her. She narrates, "They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night as for supper with their hands. Like my parents Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol..." (25). The above mentioned observations establish the simple yet powerful variations that separate the immigrants from the natives.

The next story, "Interpreter of Maladies" is a title story in this collection. This story unfolds the intricacies of the Indians living abroad, distanced from their ethos. It is the story of an emigrant Indian family on a visit to Orissa in India as tourists. The Das couple is mismatched is clear at the outset itself. Even the taxi driver, Mr. Kapasi, notes their casual attitude towards their children: "Mr. And Mrs. Das behaved like an older brother and sister, not parents. It seemed that they were in charge of the children only for the day; it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves" (49). In addition, Mr. Das seems to be more attached to India; Mrs. Das is indifferent in her attitude towards this country. Her hostility arises mostly because of the hot climate here: "I told you to get a car with air-conditioning," Mrs. Das continued, "Why do you

do this, Raj, just to save a few stupid rupees. What are you saving us, fifty cents?" (49).

"Sexy" another story from the collection has extra marital relationship as the theme. Lahiri does not project the rosy and fantastic dream life for immigrants, on moving to a more modern and advanced society. Rather she captures the strange situations which turn their dream of Americanization into a nightmare. The attitudinal conflict is apparent in the beginning itself in the extra- marital affair of Dev, a Bengal- born settled in the U.S.A. now, with Miranda. First, he attempts to Indianise her name to Mira, but he has himself become more western in his outlook on extra-marital life than her. That is obvious in his desperate and repeated attempts to adjust her limbs during lovemaking and yet his resentments that "he couldn't get enough of her" (85). After Dev leaves her apartment, she returns to her bed "still rumpled from their lovemaking and studied the boarders of Bengal" (85). Subsequently they have weeks of intense enjoyment when Dev's wife, who appears to be very much Indian in beauty and attitude, is away for a while in India. The caption for the story comes from the use of the word, 'sexy' by Dev for Miranda in a highly romantic situation, and for her: "it was the first time a man had called her sexy, and when she closed her eyes she could still feel his whisper drifting through her body, under the skin" (93).

The story which follows "Sexy" has no sex at all. "Mrs.Sen" deals with the utter loneliness, disorientation and despair of a Bengali lady in the U.S.A., who has to cope up "simultaneously with being foreign and being a wife". Mrs.Sen, a woman of thirty and without a child of their own so far, has to spend almost all her time in the university apartment, while Mr. Sen, Professor of Mathematics, is all the time busy in his academic engagements. Mr. Sen suggests his wife to learn driving and move out of the house when free. But for a typical Indian housewife, driving does not come easily. Eventually, Mrs. Sen takes up the job of baby-sitting but at her own house. Mrs. Sen remembers every moment her Calcutta, her dear city, where fresh fishes of favourite types are available in plenty all the time. She tells Eliot: "in Calcutta people ate fish first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they were lucky. They ate the tail, the eggs, even the head. It was available in any market, at any hour, from dawn until midnight" (123-124).

In the whole of his collection, Mrs. Sen is the most isolated character because she had been unwillingly plucked out from her own soil and planted in an alien country where her roots are drying out.

The caption of the next story, "This Blessed House" is highly ironical because there is constant bickering between Sanjeev and his wife Twinkle. They have recently moved from Boston to Connecticut where Sanjeev is a high profile professional soon to become the vice-president of his company while he is still thirty-three only. When Sanjeev chooses to marry Twinkle she has already been abandoned by an American lover. While Sanjeev is all for Indian food and fondly recollects his student days when he used to go to an Indian restaurant for bellyful of Mughlai chicken with spinach, for Twinkle Indian food is a bother: "she detested chopping garlic, and peeling ginger, and could not operate a blender, so it was Sanjeev who, on weekends, seasoned mustard oil with cinnamon sticks and cloves in order to produce a proper curry (14). The conflict arises when the couple starts discovering in the new house so many scattered pieces of Christian things left behind by the earlier tenant. While these items- a white porcelain effigy of Christ, a wooden cross key chain, a small plastic dome containing a miniature nativity scene, a painting of un-bearded Jesus, a plaster Virgin Mary statue- are treasured by Twinkle, Sanjeev is vexed to his last bone by these Christian paraphernalia. Each discovery irritates and unnerves Sanjeev and he secretly waits for a chance to throw everything in the garbage. Yet, because of the widening mental gap between him and his wife, he dislikes even this creation of superb art, "he hated it because he knew that Twinkle loved it" (157).

The adjustment with foreign culture again surfaces in "The Third and Final Continent". The narrator- protagonist of this story leaves his home in 1964 for England where he lives with 'penniless Bengali bachelors,' all struggling to educate and establish them abroad. In 1969, he gets an offer from MIT to join there as a librarian and he arrives by plane the day Americans land on moon. There is a contrast between his wonderful moment of America and the sad and sordid plight of this Bengali librarian slogging his hours among the dusty shelves and sustaining himself on nothing more than cornflakes and milk. His wife gets the first taste of cultural clash even before she lands up in America. She does not take any meal from Calcutta to Boston because her appetite is killed by the mere thought that she is offered oxtail soup on plane. She is a traditional Bengali lady and looks misfit here.

There are two more stories in this collection, "A Real Durwan" and "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar". These two stories unlike the previous ones are set in Bengal. Like her father, for Jhumpa Lahiri too visiting Calcutta periodically is not only a ritual but also an obsession. Her observant eyes have collected from there a few events and characters to pen these two stories.

In conclusion, though most of the stories are of Bengali individuals, they touch on universal themes, making them both specific and broad in their appeal. The conflicts of these individuals are the maladies of the inhabitants of a bicultural universe. As explained immigrants experience is not a simple and welcoming

kind rather it is traumatic and contradictory. Lahiri's stories from the collection *Interpreter of Maladies* portray the experience of cultural displacement and the consequences. The sense of rootlessness and the craving to explore their destination is pervading all through the stories. Whether it is Shoba - a busy career woman, or Mrs. Sen- a housewife, they are subjected to strife not just external but internal. Caught in a whirlpool, they suffer and become fragmented and distorted images. They are in a precarious position not able to modernize themselves at the cost of their inherited cultural ethics. Their plight is unendurable mental agony disturbing their life with the thoughts of insecurity, alienation and an anxiety to return to their homeland. A common thread running throughout is the experience of being 'foreign'.

The stories revolve around the difficulties of relationships, communication and a loss of identity for those in Diaspora. No matter where the story takes place, the characters struggle with the same feelings of exile and the struggle between the two worlds by which they are torn. The stories deal with the always-shifting lines between gender, sexuality, and social status within the Diaspora. Whether the character is a homeless woman from India or an Indian male student in the United States, all the characters displays the effects of displacement in a Diaspora. Some are homesick; many are lost in the 'new world'. With the characters poised between the old world of India and the perpetual unnerving newness of America, Jhumpa Lahiri debut story collection displayed a commendable grasp of biculturalism as well as a realistic elegance.

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